

Break a Sweat

James 2.14-26

A man fell into a pit and couldn't get himself out.

A subjective person came along and said, "I feel for you down there."

An objective person walked by and said, "It's logical that someone would fall down there."

A Pharisee said, "Only bad people fall into pits."

A mathematician calculated how deep the pit was.

A news reporter wanted the exclusive story on the pit.

An IRS agent asked if he was paying taxes on the pit.

A self-pitying person said, "You haven't seen anything until you've seen my pit."

A fire-and-brimstone preacher said, "You deserve your pit."

A Christian Scientist observed, "The pit is just in your mind."

A psychologist noted, "Your mother and father are to blame for your being in that pit."

A self-esteem therapist said, "Believe in yourself and you can get out of that pit."

An optimist said, "Things could be worse."

A pessimist claimed, "Things will get worse."

"Jesus, seeing the man, took him by the hand and lifted him out of the pit."

These people all had good intentions. They stopped and offered their opinion and maybe even some words of advice or encouragement. Ya know, you can have the best intentions; you can have the right heart and the most sincere beliefs; you can have the most accurate and detailed information, but if you don't *do* something it's of no good.

As we focus on James 2 this morning, that's what James wants to get across, when it comes to our faith, many of us feel really good because we've got the belief part down and we've filled our minds with the right information, but the question is, "Have you done something with it?" because if you haven't, then none of it really matters. I pray that this message will challenge us to "break a sweat" and do something with our faith.

Now please note that James is writing this to an audience of people who already believe. He's not writing to bring people to a point of belief; instead he is challenging people who already believe to live out those beliefs, and that's going to impact how he speaks to this audience. I would like to also point out that that this text must be studied in the context of the entire letter. That's to say that if you took this section of

James that we're going to look at today and you just read it exclusively and on its own and you didn't include any other context of the text around it, it could lead to some dangerous conclusions.

To help us think through this, imagine that there's a pendulum. We're going to call this "the pendulum of faith." On one side of the pendulum of faith is belief; on the other side is works. Now here is what has traditionally happened from the beginning of the church to today: the pendulum of faith gets swung too far in one of those directions—either towards works or towards belief—and things become out of balance.

When the pendulum of faith swings too far towards works, we call that legalism. Much of the New Testament from Paul was written to address this problem in the church. Legalism is the idea that we're saved by our good works, that we earn God's salvation, we earn His love in our life by being good enough and if we do enough good, that's how we get to heaven. So perhaps you grew up in a church like this where there was a major emphasis on, rule keeping, and the pendulum of faith had swung very hard towards legalism.

But on the other side of that is belief, we'll call it "easy-believism." "Easy-believism" is the idea that as long as you believe, it doesn't really matter how you live, what you do, the kind of choices you make or what kind of life you lead, just as long as you believe. So for those who have swung the pendulum of faith over here towards easy-believism, they just discount the

importance of their lifestyle. As long as they say they believe in Jesus...well, that's enough.

Now, while Paul in many of his books writes to address legalism, James is writing to address easy-believism—this idea that as long as I believe it doesn't matter how I live. These people had become very comfortable with separating their beliefs from their lifestyle, and he wants to push the pendulum back and restore some balance. And it seems to me that we live in a time where we have become very comfortable in our beliefs. "Well, as long as I say I believe, that's enough." We've become comfortable with claiming one belief but then living in a way that doesn't necessarily reflect it.

Look at what Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-10 "**For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.**" "We've been saved **BY** grace **THROUGH** faith to **DO** good works."

My wife's an awesome cook, she has several cookbooks at home and a binder filled with recipe's she's collected over the years. When I call home to see what's cooking for dinner, I love to hear the words, "new recipe." Have you ever heard of the "*The Three Ingredient Cookbook*?" It's the only cookbook that I know of that in every recipe you only need 3 things to make it, it must have been written by a man! But it wasn't. They even have a kids version.

Anyways, I looked up the recipe for Peanut Butter Cookies and here it is, ready? You may want to write this down. 1 cup of peanut butter (creamy or chunky) I like chunky, 1 egg, 1 cup granulated sugar. Now I wonder, if you take out one of the said three ingredients, say the egg, if things would turn out the way you had hoped. Do you think those cookies will taste right when they come out of the oven or even look right? NO WAY!

That's what Paul did in Ephesians 2. He gives us three ingredients for the proof of salvation. He says, "Look, you've been saved by grace. Make no mistake about that. It is a free gift that has been given to you by God. And it's not about what you do. That's not what saves you. It's about what's been done for you." So we've been saved by grace through faith. We accept God's grace in our lives by putting our faith in Jesus Christ, by saying, "I am going to put my trust in Him for salvation." But then in verse 10 he ends by saying "to do good works." Now if you take any one of those things out of the recipe, it doesn't work right. So, just like the Peanut Butter cookies, you need all 3 ingredients to make it right!

Now for many of us what we need to do is, in some way, unlearn the faith. Because maybe you grew up in a church that was very legalistic and you kind of had this idea that Jesus could return anytime and if He happened to return right when you were sinning, you're toast. Your life was all about rule-keeping on a day-to-day basis and if you didn't follow the right rules, I mean, if you even missed Sunday School and you

didn't have all your stickers there for attendance, you're going to have some explaining to do!

Some of you grew up in homes where it was "easy-believism." You didn't really go to church—maybe Christmas and Easter. I believe that would make you a "Chreaster." I mean that's what you were when you grew up. And as long as you believed, that was enough. And James wants us to unlearn some of those things, find the right balance, so here is what he writes. James chapter 2, we'll start in verse 14. It says, "**What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?**" If you say the right words, is that enough? As long as I claim to believe the right things, is that enough? James says, "No!" **Faith is more than what I say.** You can claim to be a Christian, you can talk a pretty good game, but that doesn't necessarily mean you have a genuine faith.

What's challenging for us is we've become very comfortable with saying we believe one thing and living in a way that is different than that. If you polled Americans and you asked them about the importance of eating right, overwhelmingly you would find that people would say that eating right is really important. Yet, I was reading the other week that the number one food that was being sold at state fairs across the country were Bacon cheeseburgers with Krispy Kreme donuts as the bun. WOW! Yeah, yeah, you act like it's gross but some of you've had it. It's the Krispy Kreme bacon cheeseburger. That's what we order. We'll say, "Eating right really matters to me." But then we turn

around and say, “I’ll have the Krispy Kreme bacon cheeseburger. That sounds good.” And there is this contradiction from what we say and from how we live.

Someone may stand in the baptistry and say, “I believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the Living God,” and that’s great. The Bible says we should confess with our mouths. But what good is that? What good is that if it doesn’t make you a more faithful friend, a more trustworthy employee, a more loving husband, a more encouraging wife, maybe even a more respectful teenager or even brother to your sister? What good is it? If you say those words, if all of us get together in this room and we claim belief in Jesus and then there are children on the streets who need a coat this winter and we don’t do anything about it. What good are those words? If it’s just words, if all it is, is talking a good game, then that’s not really faith. I like the way *The Message* paraphrases verse 14. It says, **“Dear friends, do you think you’ll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it?”** Just because we come in and sound impressive doesn’t mean we really have faith.

I was reading an article about a survey McDonald’s did years ago. They asked their customers, “What would you like to see differently about McDonald’s?” and overwhelmingly the number one answer people said was, “McDonald’s, we’d like you to have a healthier menu.” Specifically, people asked for a healthy cheeseburger. “Could your scientists go back there

and put together some kind of chemicals that would result in a healthy cheeseburger?” So McDonald’s came up with a healthy cheeseburger. Do you remember what it was called? Yeah, I know, it’s hard to remember it didn’t last long. It was called, “The McLean Sandwich.” How many of you had the McLean? Not very many, but a lot of you said you wanted it. All kinds of people said, “If you had a healthy cheeseburger, that’s what I would order.” McDonald’s said, “Okay, McLean Sandwich.” But instead we say, “I think I’ll have a Krispy Kreme Bacon Cheeseburger instead.”

James says, “Look, be careful that you don’t mistake your words for faith. **Faith is more than just words, it’s putting those words into action!**”

In verse 15 and 16 he gives some practical examples. If you’ll look at this, in chapter 2, 15 and 16 he says, **“Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?”** If you know somebody in your life who’s hurting and you can do something to help them but instead you say, “Bless you,” instead you say, “I’m praying for you,” what good are those words if you don’t do something.

And maybe your words come from a very sincere heart—I mean, there is something within you that really feels bad for their situation—and you say, “I am so sorry for what you’re going through.” Your neighbor

has maybe lost a job and you feel really bad for that difficulty, so you say the right things but what do you do?

Faith is more than what I feel. Here is what I think happens for many Christians: We confuse our feelings, for faith. We let ourselves off the hook because we feel the right way. And we kind of pat ourselves on the back because when someone goes through a difficult time, I mean, we can get a little emotional about that. We really feel compassion towards them. But the question is, “Do we do anything?”

So **it’s not how you feel. It’s what you do with those feelings.**” We can come into the sanctuary on a Sunday morning and we can sing songs of worship, and we can feel some emotion behind them as we stand and the music moves us; but really, faith has more to do with, not how you feel inside this room, but what you do outside this room. It has more to do with how you treat people in the parking lot as you leave and the kindness you show the server at the restaurant. Verse 17, James puts it this way: **“Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”**

So here’s what I want you to do. I want you to think of your faith and ask yourself, “Is it alive or dead?” Check the vital signs for life. If there is no action, if you can’t point to me some evidence of your faith being alive, James says, “It’s dead.” It may look attractive. You may have a Mercedes faith but if there is no gas in that car it’s not going to go anywhere. It’s dead Jim!

Now in **verse 18** he wants to make sure we’re not swinging this pendulum too far towards legalism. He wants to make sure that we’re not getting too carried away with this. So he comes up with this hypothetical person that’s going to take it too far and basically say, “Yep, I’ve been trying to say this James. I’ve been trying to tell the people it’s all about works; it’s all about what we do.” But James says in 2.18, “But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” WOW! That’s kind of legalistic, but James goes on to say, “Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do” So James makes it very clear that **faith is more than what I do.**

If you go out on the street and you just ask people, “Are you going to go to heaven? I mean, if you were to die today would you go to heaven?” overwhelmingly people say, “Yeah, I would. If I died today, I would go to heaven.” Then you ask people, “Why? I’d dare to say the most popular answer would be, “good works.” People will point to their life and say, “Look what I’ve done!” They’ll essentially think of their life as this balance of good and bad and as long as the good outweighs the bad then they’re in. And James wants to remind us that it’s works that are the evidence of our faith, **it’s not just good works, it’s faith accompanied by action.** So if there’s no works to accompany our faith, then our faith is dead. We’re saved by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ to do good works.

Verse 19 he kind of brings people back to the original intent of writing, what this audience needed to hear.

Here's what we read in verse 19: "You believe that there is one God. Well, that's good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder." You've put your confidence over here in your belief, you've just swung from the "legalism" to "easy believism," but he says, "Look, even the demons believe." And here is what we see: **Faith is more than what I believe.**

And a lot of us can put our confidence in our intellectual knowledge and we think, "Well, because I know this, and that about the Bible, that means my faith is real." And James says, "Look, don't confuse your collection of commentaries, don't confuse your biblical knowledge, don't confuse your understanding of Scripture with faith. Faith is more than just this intellectual knowledge. It's more than just this mental belief."

D.L. Moody put it this way. He says, "The Bible wasn't given to impart information but to bring about transformation." James wants the people to understand, and be careful to not **confuse knowledge of the Bible or intellectual understanding of Scripture for faith. Live it out!**

I read about a peculiar fisherman from Minnesota. You see this fisherman was very well prepared. He knew how to fish. He had everything you need to be a good fisherman. He had poles, nets, bait, and even a really nice boat, but this fisherman had a problem. You see, for all his preparation he never caught anything. Not one fish. Not one, not ever. And you know why he never caught a fish? What do you think? The answers easy: He never went fishing. He had all the knowledge and equipment, but he

never got into the boat, he never left the dock. The same goes for us, you can have all the right information and all the right equipment, but if you're not living it out it doesn't really matter. See, for most of us our problem is not an information and equipment problem, it's an application problem. It's not that we need more and more knowledge. We need to take what we know and we need to live it out in our life.

When Jesus talked about this in **Matthew chapter 7.15-20**, He used this image of a tree that bears no fruit. He's talking to people about how they could know whether someone's faith is real, whether it is genuine, and He says, "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit." He concludes by saying, "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them." So if your tree of faith has no fruit growing from it, if there is nothing that you can point to as evidence that you've been saved by grace through faith, then there's a problem.

Michael Novak is a Catholic philosopher. He described belief in three different ways. He first described what he called "**public belief.**" Public beliefs are the beliefs that we have where we will try to get other people to think we believe something that we don't really believe. Does that make sense? So we will talk about our

family or we'll talk about our marriage and we'll talk about our finances in a way that isn't true, but we want people to think it's true. We don't really believe it, but we want people to believe that we believe. Those are public beliefs.

He also talks about "**private beliefs**." He says, "Private beliefs are the beliefs that we have that we sincerely believe. I mean, we genuinely think they are true. But when those beliefs are tested we discover they're not true." So you picture Peter on the night before Jesus was facing His trials, Jesus said to Peter, "Tomorrow you'll disown me," and Peter said, "No, no, no. Lord, not I. Everyone else may fall away, but I would never disown you." Now did he believe that? Yeah. He sincerely believed it, but the next day those beliefs were tested and it turns out that those beliefs weren't real beliefs. In other words, reality proved what he really believed.

But then Mike Novak also talks about what he calls "**core beliefs**." These are the only true beliefs because they are beliefs that are backed up by reality. So it's not just something we say; it's not just something we're convinced of, but it's something that our life demonstrates.

If you have James open flip back to chapter one. James chapter one, verse 22—we'll start there. Here is what he says, "**Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.**" Don't merely think that because you're sitting here in church and you're taking notes that that means you're a

person of faith. Do what it says. "And anyone who listens to the word (verse 23) but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like." Can you believe it? He doesn't do anything about what he saw in the mirror. "But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does." So James uses a mirror as an example of God's Word. That if we look at God's Word and we're just looking at it for information but we don't really do anything with the information, it's like a person who looks at himself in a mirror, sees some problems but doesn't do anything about it.

So just imagine this. Imagine that you're getting ready for work in the morning and you step into the bathroom and you look in the mirror. You've tried your best to avoid it but you just happen to catch a glimpse. As you look in the mirror the mirror doesn't lie, and you see a gut that is getting a little bit bigger; you see arms that you think are getting a little flabby. So you see these different things that the mirror is telling you. Well, what do you do with that? If you go to the kitchen, grab some powdered donuts and Mountain Dew, hop in that La-Z-Boy and watch Sports Center, hypothetically speaking, then chances are next time when you look in the mirror a week later it's going to look very similar. The gut may even be a little bit bigger. So what do you do? You don't get mad at the mirror. You don't get upset that the mirror hasn't changed you.

No, the mirror shows you the truth about yourself, but it's what you do with what you see in the mirror that changes you.

The same is true with the Word of God. It's not good enough to just open it up and read it. It's what you do with it when you read it that matters. And there are some people who don't want to look in the mirror. They don't want to look into God's Word. They would prefer a church, maybe, where the Word of God isn't held up, where nobody holds up the mirror. Or maybe they would rather us use trick mirrors. You know like in the magic house? They make you look really muscular or really skinny. And some of us would prefer that. Show us God's Word in a way that makes us look good. But when we look at God's Word and it speaks truth into our lives, the question is, "What will we do with what we see?"

So as James closes he gives two examples of how faith without works is dead. First is a predictable example. **Verse 21**, "Was not our ancestor **Abraham** considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions..." Did ya get that. "...his faith and his actions were working together." What he believed and what he did is what made him a person of faith. And if you study this in Scripture you'll find that it's in Genesis 22 where we read about what James is talking about here, where he offers his son and he is considered righteous for what he did. But it's in Genesis 15 that he believes God. He believes God; it's credited to him as righteousness. But when we talk about Abraham as a

person of faith we point to what he did, for it's what he did that shows us the evidence for his belief.

There's a surprising example. Look at **Verse 25**, "In the same way, was not even **Rahab** the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?" So James uses this great patriarch of the faith, Abraham, and he uses this Gentile prostitute named Rahab, who is also mentioned in Hebrews 11 as a great person of faith. And he says, "Now how do we know those were people of faith? Why do we consider them to be people of faith?" It wasn't because Abraham had this rich tradition. It wasn't because of the promises God gave him. It's what he did. And the same is true for Rahab who had this sinful past, who wasn't even part of the nation of Israel, but what she did showed her to be a person of faith. Faith and works go **hand-in-hand**.

Then chapter 2 ends this way (This is out of the New Living Translation.): "**Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works.**" And the question for you as we finish is, what's the evidence for your faith? I know that you might be able to say the right things, and I appreciate the fact that sometimes your faith brings tears to your eyes, but where's the fruit? If people were going to point to your life, what would they point to? Would they point to maybe a missionary that you support overseas? Would they point to the kind words that you spoke to a discouraged coworker? Would they point to

the way you act at home? **What's the evidence of your faith?**

Back on June 30, 1859, a man by the name of Charles Blondin accomplished an amazing feat. He crossed Niagara Falls on a tightrope. He crossed on a 3 inch round rope stretched 1,100 feet across the falls at a height of 160 feet. Not only that but in the ensuing days he also accomplished these amazing feats while crossing the falls: he executed a backwards somersault, crossed while blindfolded, while pushing a wheelbarrow, on stilts, in the dark with Roman candles flaring from the ends of his balancing pole, and one time even stopped half way across and cooked an omelet on a portable stove and ate it.

Then on September 15, 1860, he accomplished his most amazing feat of all and it went something like this: Before crossing the rope on that particular day Charles Blondin turned to the crowd and said, "Do you believe I can carry someone across the rope on my back?" The crowd roared its approval, "Yes, we believe you can!"

Then Charles asked for a volunteer, "Who will volunteer?" The crowd was silent. He then pointed out one man standing nearby, "How about you?" The man said, "Hardly, you don't think I am going to risk my life like that, do you?" and he turned away.

Next Charles pointed out another man, "And what about you?" The man replied, "I believe. In fact, I have

no doubt at all." Charles said, "Will you trust me?" The man replied, "I will!"

The man then proceeded to climb on the back of Charles Blondin and they headed across the falls. The crowd waited breathlessly while they crossed and roared their approval once they completed the crossing. What they didn't know was that the man who crossed on Blondin's back was Harry Colcord, his manager. You see Harry Colcord knew how good Charles Blondin was and fully trusted him.

And I wonder, really, if our faith were put to the test what we would find this morning. I know a lot of us will say the right things. We'll feel the right way. We'll try and do the right things and even believe in the right things, but are you willing to put their faith into action? The effectiveness of a message like this, really any message for that matter, is not what you've learned. It's not what you've written down. It's what you do this afternoon. It's who you are tomorrow. So my prayer is that all of us will "break a sweat" and DO something.